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SUBJECT: RUSSIANS DEBATE ROLE OF THE CHURCH

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Summary

11. (SBU) The dog days of August have seen a protracted debate here about the proper role of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) in a country in which church and state are officially separated. The debate was triggered by the near simultaneous expressions of unease by a member of the Public Chamber and a group of eminent scientists that included two Nobel laureates. Both parties worried publicly about what they termed the "clericalization" of Russia by a resurgent church. Their public expressions of concern provoked a response from church representatives, and Patriarch Aleksey II himself. Underlying this ongoing debate are efforts to fill an ideological void left by the collapse of the Soviet Union, issues of class, and the search for a balance between the secular and the spiritual as a church long repressed begins to flex its muscles, in some instances with active support from some quarters in the government. End summary.

Intelligentsia Voices Concern

12. (U) On July 23, Moscow newspapers published an open letter to President Putin from ten members of the Academy of Sciences, led by Nobel laureates Zhores Alferov and Vitaliy Ginzburg that protested the "clericalization" of Russia and the continued need for a separation of church and state. Among the sources of concern for the ten was a controversial course on the fundamentals of Orthodox Christianity being taught in schools in some regions of the country and the alleged "infiltration" of government institutions, including the army, by the ROC. The academicians also objected to an effort by the ROC to include theology in the list of subjects accredited by the Ministry of Education's Higher Qualifications Board.

13. (U) Just prior to the academicians' letter, prominent professor of architecture and Public Chamber member Vyacheslav Glazychev voiced similar concerns in the media about the "creeping clericalization" of Russia. Prompting his comments, Glazychev subsequently told us, was a decision by a St. Petersburg court to accept for consideration a case contesting the teaching of Darwinism in schools and subsequent comments by Patriarch Aleksey that the teaching of Darwin was "unacceptable."

The ROC Reacts

¶4. (U) The ROC's reaction to the academicians' sallies was swift. In their responses, which have filled the airwaves and the pages of all of the central newspapers over the last several weeks, some church representatives have attempted to couch the argument as one between atheists and believers. The ROC's upper echelons have more diplomatically and indirectly agreed with the scientists that church and state should be separate, but that there can be no separation from society, and since the church is an intrinsic part of society, it is in practice impossible to separate the ROC from the GOR in an overwhelmingly Russian Orthodox society.

¶5. (U) Still other factions that link themselves with the ROC have been less restrained in their reaction to the intelligentsia's expressions of concern, with the very conservative "Peoples' Collective" requesting that the Moscow Prosecutor bring criminal charges against the scientists. Approximately 25 members of the "United Orthodox Youth Movement for Reviving Spirituality" briefly picketed the Public Chamber, and called on President Putin not to re-appoint Glazychev as one of its members.

Themes in the Debate

¶6. (SBU) Although not well elucidated by its participants, observers have noted many threads to the debate launched by the academicians:

-- The collapse of the Soviet Union left behind it an ideological void that for the time being the church alone seems equipped to fill. The Putin government's insistence that living better tomorrow than yesterday is the chief domestic attribute of the resurgent Russia state has left

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many citizens cold, and the ROC has stepped in to provide a framework within which problems like interethnic conflict, alcoholism, and demographic decline can be grappled with. While critics like Glazychev have told us that they agree that there is a role for the church in addressing such problems, they object when the ROC ventures into what they see as bastions of secularism, like education.

-- Even religious figures worry about the pride of place claimed by the ROC in today's Russia. Pentecostal Bishop and Public Chamber member Sergey Ryakhovskiy was not surprised that concerns had been publicly voiced. Frustration with the ROC had been accumulating for some time, he told us, and with recent events a tipping point had been reached. Ryakhovskiy agreed with Glazychev that the ROC had a role in developing a moral framework, but Russia was multi-confessional, and Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, and other Christian denominations could not be forgotten in the process.

-- Some in the ROC have attempted to style the divide on this issue as one of class. Moscow Patriarchy Department of External Relations Archpriest Chaplin has on two occasions in the media accused the scientists of "elitism" in their call for a secular society. The "people" of Russia, Chaplin has said, "want something else."

-- Still others have seen the debate as potentially key to restoring the correct balance between church and state. While Chaplin has elsewhere implicitly suggested that the ROC has overreached in its rush to recover after the Soviet period, he has described the aggressive resurgence as "understandable," and has pointed out that, even in the sensitive area of education, the ROC is a shadow of its pre-revolutionary self. Before 1917, the ROC sponsored some 35,000 Sunday schools compared to the handful operating today, he has noted. Ryakhovskiy has termed the debate a "punch in the eye" for the ROC which, he hopes, will cause it

to tread more cautiously in the future.

Comment

17. (SBU) Four years ago, President Putin called for dialogue on the role of the church in Russia's constitutionally secular society, and the President's call was echoed again this month by Human Rights Ombudsman Vladimir Lukin, who suggested that ROC representatives and the academicians meet in order to air their concerns. Lukin's proposal was implemented after a fashion when the two sides debated the issue at an extended press conference in Moscow August 8. The media-studded forum, however, did little to encourage genuine discussion and it is likely that some time will have to pass before all points of view can be more dispassionately aired.

RUSSELL